

Things his mother taught him

by Amy Hewes
College of Engineering

was six months old, the mother must labor in the fields and at any other job she can find to support her family. Many nights, the mother and son go to bed hungry. But despite her extreme poverty and the fact that she never attended school herself, the mother is determined to better her son's life by making sure he receives an education. At this time, Harapanahalli has no school, so, from the first to the eighth grade, the boy walks two miles each morning and afternoon to attend school in a neighboring village. He walks six miles farther to go to high school.

The boy excels in his studies and pushes on to the university located in Bangalore, India's high-tech center. To pay for his studies, the young man borrows money and also rises at dawn to work in a dairy before class; he returns to the job after school until late at night. He never gives in to exhaustion, and encouraged by his professors, Mallareddy achieves the almost unthinkable for a person of his background: he earns a scholarship to study in the United States. He receives his master's degree and Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma, and arrives at Cal Poly

Civil engineering professor Harapanahalli Mallareddy teaches courses on hydrology, coastal engineering, and water resources engineering. But if students pay attention to the man, if they listen to his story, they also learn much larger lessons about hardship, hard work, and altruism.

Mallareddy's story begins with a boy living in a small hut with his mother in the village of Harapanahalli, India. Because the boy's father died when the boy



Professor Mallareddy and the woman who inspired him — his mother, Akkamma Mallareddy (photo left, courtesy of Prof. Mallareddy). (Photo of Prof. Mallareddy by Marcia Wright.)

hard work

altruism

in 1981 to teach in the fledgling Civil and Environmental Engineering Department.

Today, Mallareddy is a soft-spoken, modest man, who carries an acute awareness of his roots and the debt he owes his mother. "My mother is responsible for where I am now," he says. "Without her sacrifice, I'd have worked in the fields forever."

As a first step, Mallareddy donated his ancestral land left to him by his mother — the property abuts the current schoolyard. Then he set up a School Betterment Committee made up of a dozen village officials and residents and chaired by his boyhood friend, M. Jayaram, who is also chair of the village *panchayat*, or council. "I've contributed an initial \$8,000 to provide seed money needed to clear the land, hire an architect, draw up the plans,

people live a very marginal existence, side by side with nature — in fact, marauding, wild elephants still pose a frequent threat!"

In hopes of attracting additional donors, Lang has helped publicize the project to other faculty members. "It's such a worthwhile effort and, really, so extraordinary for a man who has surmounted the humblest of backgrounds to go back to his roots and give such a

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One of his students, Aaron Fukuda, notes, "Professor Mallareddy drives this old Buick from the '70s — he's not all caught up in status and money. Instead, he's always telling us that we should be thankful for our education and that we should give back to our community."

Mallareddy's own generous and ambitious gift to his home community — and tribute to his mother — is a school for the children of Harapanahalli. "I returned home every summer to care for my mother until she died in 1997," he says, "and each trip I witnessed the very poor condition of the village school. Seven grades, 160 students, are taught in one 40-foot by 40-foot room. There are no desks and the children sit right on the floor. Can you imagine trying to learn in that environment? But the children's faces are so exuberant! I decided that I would undertake to build a new facility named in honor of my mother, Akkamma Mallareddy."

and drill a well," explains Mallareddy. "I'm in contact with Jayaram every week to make sure the project stays on track."

The new school will include six classrooms, a library, a computer room, a staff room and principal's office, a playground, and a garden area. The total cost is \$50,000, dirt-cheap by U.S. standards, but a formidable sticker price for one person on a professor's salary. "We need \$10,000 to \$15,000 in hand before we begin construction," notes Mallareddy, who plans on donating his entire summer income from consulting or teaching to the project.

One of the first persons to recognize the magnitude of Mallareddy's undertaking has been Rob Lang, chair of Cal Poly's Civil and Environmental Engineering Department. "I've seen the village firsthand, when I visited Reddy [as he's known in the department] for two weeks last summer," says Lang. "It's another world, a place out of one's imagination, where the

tremendous amount. We all can learn a lot from Reddy."

Mallareddy's students agree. "I've taken I don't know how many classes from Dr. Mallareddy and he's always willing to talk about more than engineering. He talks about what we should do in life — he *moves you!*" exclaims Aaron Fukuda.

Civil Engineering Lecturer Dina Cadenazzi voices a similar opinion: "I've had Dr. Mallareddy as a professor and what I will always remember about him is his devotion to his work and teaching, and, above all, his compassion."


When they read about Mallareddy's school project in the *Mustang Daily*, Cadenazzi and Fukuda teamed up to organize a fund-raising event at a local San Luis Obispo eatery sponsored by three student clubs: Chi Epsilon, the Society of Civil Engineers, and Alpha Phi Omega. "We raised \$300 and I'd guess 150 students attended, so we're getting the word out," says Fukuda.

Mallareddy is grateful for the help and attention to his project, but sounding like the teacher he is, he says, "I value the students' enthusiasm even more than the money. It's not easy for a lot of our students to understand what it means to start your life with absolutely nothing, like the children of Harapanahalli."

Whether or not Mallareddy's Cal Poly students ever come to truly

understand poverty, chances are they will come away from his classes with a better appreciation for "devotion," "sacrifice," and "charity." And, like Dina Cadenazzi, they might just learn that "one person can make a difference."

[Note: The Akkamma Mallareddy School is scheduled for completion by fall 2001, depending on funding. Anyone wishing to donate to the

project can send a check, made out to the India Abroad Foundation, to Harapanahalli Mallareddy at 1640 El Caserio Court, San Luis Obispo, CA 93401. A receipt will be sent by the foundation to the donor for tax purposes.] 

See related story on page 8.

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— Harapanahalli Mallareddy

A Dose of Kindness

Director of Alumni Relations Ben Beesley (SOCS '86) (kneeling in foreground), helps give polio vaccine to a small boy in India as part of Rotary International's National Immunization Day. Beesley, who this year was named Rotarian of the Year by local Rotary district San Luis Obispo de Tolossa, was among many Rotarians from around the world, along with volunteers and Indian government officials, who administered the polio vaccine to more than 131 million Indian children. 